

# Update of COVID-19 Delta Variant and Revised CDC Guidelines

Joe A. Anzaldua, MD

This is an update to the COVID-19 Delta Variant in our area and the revised CDC Guidelines.

On August 3, 2021, Fort Bend County raised the community risk level from yellow (low-to-moderate risk) to the previous orange (moderate-to-high risk). This means that although our health care system has adequate capacity, it could be exceeded. It also means avoiding large public and private gatherings, as well as avoiding non-essential business and personal travel – especially if you are not vaccinated. The following day, Harris County raised its COVID-19 threat level from orange to red, which recommends staying at home, unless fully vaccinated.

The level of community transmission in Fort Bend County is currently listed as “High” with a recent and significant uptick in ER cases and hospital admissions for both general beds and ICU beds. The Medical Center is reporting the same issues. The increased transmission of the Delta Variant (DV) and vaccination hesitancy have no doubt added to this surge. The good news is that there has been reported a recent spike in people getting vaccinated.

In Texas, TDSHS has reported 43 COVID-19 deaths in vaccinated persons (breakthrough infections) from 2/8/2021 through 7/14/2021. Three-quarters of those deaths were individuals with serious medical conditions, while more than 95% were 60 years of age or older.

According to the CDC, from 6/19 through 7/23, COVID-19 cases in the U.S. substantially increased which has led to more hospitalizations and deaths – the DV being the main culprit, and being driven mostly because of unvaccinated people. The DV is considered to be highly transmissible, especially in indoor spaces during long periods of time or places with poor ventilation. This variant is thought to be about twice as contagious as the wild type (original). The DV now accounts for close to 90% of infections in the US.

The mRNA vaccines (Pfizer and Moderna) are still considered to be highly effective against the DV, reducing the risk of illness by 88%, and reducing the risk of hospitalization by 96%. Moreover, it has been reported that up to 97% of hospital admissions and 99% of deaths are among unvaccinated individuals! It should be kept in mind that these vaccinations were never meant to be a zero-risk or “all-or-none” proposition. So these vaccines, while reducing the risk, does NOT eliminate the risk of contracting or transmitting the infection to unvaccinated people.

As the spread of the DV is increasing across the country, reports are coming in of infections in vaccinated people – so called “Breakthrough” infections. But with these breakthrough cases, serious illness, hospitalizations and death are considered to be uncommon if not rare. It has been reported that 99 percent of deaths from Covid-19 are among the unvaccinated.

So the good news is that if you are vaccinated it is unlikely to lead to severe illness, hospitalization or even death. In fact, it is very likely that if a vaccinated person becomes infected, they will either have little to no symptoms. So, the mRNA vaccines appear to be getting the job done in recognizing the virus infecting the body and preventing serious illness and even death.

At this time there is no universal mandate for vaccination. And the previous CDC guidance was that vaccinated people could remove their masks indoors.

But on July 29, an internal CDC document revealed a new report that vaccinated people are capable of spreading the coronavirus. This report revealed that vaccinated persons infected with DV may be able to transmit the virus as easily as those who are infected but unvaccinated.

So this is felt to be the main reason that two days earlier (July 27, 2021), the CDC changed their guidelines and are now recommending that even vaccinated people should wear mask in high risk settings such as shopping malls, airports, concert halls, etc. So this essentially reversed their previous guidance that only unvaccinated people wear face masks. The CDC also recommended that schools reopen this fall with all students, teachers and staff wearing face masks – even those that are fully vaccinated. This recommendation appears to be in directed conflict with an Executive Order issued by Governor Abbott prohibiting mandatory use of masks in certain settings such as public government facilities as well as public schools.

In addition, the CDC reasoned that since risk of breakthrough infections CANNOT be eliminated 100%, especially during this time of increased transmissibility of the DV, it is considered reasonable for vaccinated people to wear a mask when around people who are at high-risk such as those with immunocompromised illness or those with underlying medical conditions, advanced age, pregnancy, and even children too young to be vaccinated. And many medical experts still believe that the scientific evidence is weighted towards the fact that masks substantially lower the risk of contracting and transmitting SARS-CoV-2.

The use of face masks and even vaccinations are controversial with many weighing in with differing opinions. Also federal government agencies responsible for setting public health policy and guidance have put out what appears to be conflicting or inconsistent information. Controversy among experts as well as social media, and even politicians on both sides of the aisle providing confusing information has no doubt lead to distrust among a lot of people. Messaging has been inadequate, especially with our most vulnerable and underserved populations. This has not made it any easier for us to provide a unified message with respect to public health guidance and policy recommendations.

Please keep in mind what is our main public health objective: We are trying to prevent a peak as bad as the previous one in terms of case numbers. In addition, increased transmission gives way to possibility of even more variants where vaccines may not be as effective or variants that are more virulent. And we still have a large percentage of the population that are not be vaccinated and/or is vulnerable.

On July 29, 2021, an executive order issued by Governor Abbott (GA-38) seems to revoke a county judge's ability (or authority) to restrict occupancy and still prevents government agencies from requiring masks. In addition it appears to restrict such agencies from mandating vaccines, or requesting vaccine status

Although there is no mandate to wear face masks in most circumstances pursuant to Texas Governor Greg Abbott's recent executive order, I think it would be reasonable at this time and to the extent permitted by law, to strongly encourage the use of face masks indoors for all individuals, especially in poorly ventilated areas - unvaccinated as well as partially/fully vaccinated individuals.

It is probably a good idea to re-introduce or reemphasize some non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) such as the "3 Ws" that I have mentioned in the past:

1. **W**ear a face mask
2. **W**atch your distance
3. **W**ash your hands

**Vaccination Hesitancy** has no doubt contributed to the increased cases of COVID-19. Recent survey has shown that concerns about vaccine side effects and distrust seem to be important factors. Another survey has shown that what was most likely to motivate the unvaccinated to get inoculated was full FDA vaccine approval and vaccine availability from their personal physician.

I still believe that the key to ending this pandemic is vaccination. We are not likely to eradicate SARS-CoV-2 in our lifetime but we certainly can (and will) put the brakes on this pandemic. So, please get vaccinated!

On August 9, 2021, the State of Texas announced actions that will be taken to assist healthcare facilities by increasing staffing and capacity. In addition, the State of Texas will take steps to open more COVID-19 antibody infusion centers across the state. These infusion centers will provide outpatient treatment of COVID-19 patients and hopefully take the burden off of hospitals by reducing hospital admissions. Governor Abbott ordered state agencies to increase the availability of vaccines.

Joe A. Anzaldua, MD  
Local Health Authority, City of Stafford